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ABSTRACT

Examined was the effect of viewing an aggressive film on the behavior of 22 moderately and mildly mentally retarded children (5-11 years old). Ss' doll playing was observed after they viewed a nonaggressive and an aggressive film. Results supported the hypothesis that Ss would exhibit more aggressive behavior following the aggressive than the nonaggressive film. Males were more aggressive than females following the nonaggressive film, while females were more aggressive following the aggressive film. Ss with lower IQs were more influenced than Ss with high IQs. (CL)

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Effects of Aggressive vs. Nonaggressive Films on the Aggressive Behavior of Mentally Retarded Children

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Introduction

Despite the widespread concern over the possible effects of the portrayal of violence through the mass media, the mountains of research in this area, and the simultaneous growing interest in the field of mental retardation, surprisingly little research has been done concerning the effects of the mass media on the mentally retarded. The only related studies found during the research of this study were Greene and Hoats (1969) and Fechter (1971). The present study was designed to examine the relationship between mass media viewing of aggression and aggressive behavior in the mentally retarded, and more specifically to test the hypothesis "Mentally retarded children exhibit more aggressive behavior following the viewing of an aggressive film than following the viewing of a nonaggressive film." In this study aggressive act is defined as any deliberate act, provoked or unprovoked, that might be harmful to the physical or mental well-being of the person at whom it is aimed (e.g., hitting, kicking, slapping, biting, scratching, etc.). Non aggressive act is to be defined as any act that does not meet the criteria of an

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aggressive act. Those films portraying aggressive acts have been defined as aggressive and those films completely void of such acts have similarly been defined as nonaggressive. While some social scientists have noted slight differences between violence and aggression, for the purpose of this study, violence is to be considered identical to aggression. Mentally retarded, as defined by New York State law, and for the purpose of this study, refers to anyone with an I.Q. score below 75. All I.Q. scores used in this study are based on the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test.

As the public, government, and social scientists look, with growing concern, for answers to the increasing amount of violence in society, they turn sooner or later to the increasing portrayal of violence in the mass media (Cisin et al, 1972; Baker and Ball, 1969a, 1969b). The mass media has become an integral part of our daily lives. This is particularly true in the case of television and has thus made television a focal point for concern over the effect of the mass media portrayal of violence.

The mass media are an integral part of the daily life of virtually every American. Among these media, the youngest, television, is the most pervasive. Ninety-five percent of American homes have at least one TV set, and on the average that set is in use for about 40 hours each week. The central place of television in American life makes this medium the focal

> point of growing national concern over the effects of media portrayal of violence on the values, attitudes and behavior of an ever-increasing audience (The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, 1969, p. 187).

Despite the mountains of empirical as well as historical research into the effects of violence portrayed through the mass media (Albert, 1957; Maccoby and Wilson, 1957; Emery, 1959; Schramm, 1961; Mussen and Rutherford, 1961; Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961, 1963; Hick, 1965; Meyerson, 1967; Baker and Ball, 1969a, 1969b; Kniveton and Stephenson, 1970; Feshbach, 1955, 1956, 1961; Feshbach and Singer, 1971; Stein and Freidrich, 1962; Cisin et al, 1972; Liebert, Neale and Davidson, 1973), there remain three diametrically opposed hypotheses. The first emphasizes abreaction by fantasy (the cathartic hypothesis). In this case a person seeing aggression portrayed by the media vicariously experiences the aggressive act and thus, having any aggressive desires and tendencies abreacted has weaker tendencies toward the actual overt acts (Dollard, Dobb, Miller, Mowrer and Sears, 1939; Feshbach, 1955). Feshbach, for example, found that writing aggressive TAT stories following the arousal of aggression, led to a reduction in the amount of interpersonal aggression manifested. Feshbach interpreted this as supportive of the cathartic hypothesis. In 1961 Feshbach conducted a study that produced results more directly supportive of the

cathartic hypothesis. He put college men into a number of uncalled for and extremely critical remarks. Subjects then saw an aggressive film of a prizefighter or a neutral (nonaggressive) film. After the film each subject was given a questionnaire on which he could evaluate the competence of the experimenter who had insulted him. The uninsulted subjects showed no differences in evaluating regardless of which film they had seen. Of the subjects who have been insulted, those who had seen the fight film showed a lower level of punitiveness than those who had seen the nonaggressive film. Feshbach interpreted this to abreaction during the fight, thus, confirming symbolic catharsis.

The second hypothesis which is seldom put forward maintains that there are no notable effects from the viewing of the mass media violence and these studies usually interpret these results as being inconclusive rather than showing that there are no effects whatsoever (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, and Vince, 1968).

The third hypothesis maintains that the mass media portrayal of aggression merely incites the desires and increases the tendency to carry out aggressive acts. It is this latter hypothesis that has most often been put forward and seems most to be varified by experiemntation (Siegel, 1956; Mussen and Rutherford, 1961; Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1961, 1963; Stein and Freidrich,

1972). Mussen and Rutherford (1961), for example, found that upon viewing aggressive cartoons, children tended to be more aggressive than when viewing a nonaggressive cartoon or no cartoon at all. Aggression was measured by verbal responses to questions concerning the subjects desire to break a balloon. This test had previously been developed and used by Stone (1956). Siegel (1956), similarly, found that after viewing an aggressive cartoon, preschool children were more aggressive than they were following a nonaggressive cartoon. Siegel's measure of aggression was overt aggressive acts in an interpersonal relationship. The research in this area appears to be so conclusive that Dr. Percey Tannenbaum of the Annenberg School of Communication, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania said, when reporting to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, "the issue about the mass media effects generally isn't an issue any longer. To deny them any effect at all is to deny environment an effect. Not because the mass media constitutes our environment, but they are part of it." (Baker and Ball, 1969b, p. 44).

If the subject area is narrowed, however, to cover the effects of aggressive films only on specific groups such as mentally retarded children, the field is almost void of literature (i.e., Greene and Hoats, 1969; Fechter, 1971). Fechter (1971), for example, matched 20 aggressive mentally retarded subjects with 20 nonaggressive mentally retarded subjects for age,

sex, and I.Q. scores. Half of each group saw an aggressive film and the other half of each group saw a friendly (nonaggressive) film. Subjects from both groups who had observed the friendly film were observed to be more friendly following the viewing. Similarly, subjects from both groups who had observed the aggressive film were observed to be more aggressive following the viewing. Greene and Hoats (1969) similarly found television to be a reinforcer of negative behavior among the mentally retarded and hypothesized on the possible use of television as a reinforcer of positive behavior modification. In both the above studies the measure of aggression was aggressive acts in interpersonal relationships.

Method

Subjects consisted of 26 mentally retarded children from the Shield Institute for Retarded Children in Flushing, New York. Subjects were typical of the general population of the school. Four subjects were absent for at least one part of the study and their scores were not used. This left a total of 22 subjects (14 males and 8 females). The age range was 5.2 to 11.6 with a mean age of 7.0. For males the age range was 5.2 to 11.6 with a mean age of 6.10. For females the age range was 6.8 to 9.3 with a mean age of 8.0. Intelligence test scores ranged from 32 to 74 with a mean score of 46.

For males the range was 32 to 74 with a mean score of 51. For females the range was 32 to 48 with a mean score of 42.

Each class of 7 to 9 children was tested individually by the same experimenter. Each child in the class being tested was given a toy doll to play with for 15 minutes. During that time the raw score of aggressive acts against the dolls and against one another were tabulated in a manner similar to that developed by Bandura, Ross and Ross (1963) and Fechter (1971). Children who left the dolls for other activities were gently coaxed, but not forced to return to playing with the dolls. The experimenter hoped in this way to avoid frustrations that may have caused further aggression and contaminated test scores. The children were then exposed to a nonaggressive film and the test situation repeated. One week was allowed to lapse and the entire procedure was then repeated. The only difference was the substitution of an aggressive film for the nonaggressive film.

The nonaggressive film was 4 minutes and 16 seconds long and consisted of a segment on skydiving, a scene of several people socializing, and a comedy segment about a cross-eyed taxicab driver. The segments ran 3 minutes and 2 seconds, 20 seconds, and 54 seconds respectively. The film was entirely void of aggressive acts. The aggressive film, like the nonaggressive film, ran 4 minutes and 16 seconds and consisted of three parallel segments.

Each segment was identical in time with its counterpart in the nonaggressive film. The segments included Thai boxing (which permits kicking, punching, and elbowing and is much more violent than the American version of boxing), a stabbing scene (where several people attack and stab a single individual), and a fight segment from a Popeye cartoon.

The one week lapse between testing situations was allowed to prevent possible boredom with the dolls and the experimental situation from effecting scores. Pretesting and posttesting in both situations and then comparing the differences in raw scores further allowed for the control of interference from any unforeseen circumstances during the week between testing situation one and testing situation two. Pretesting and posttesting in both situations also permitted the subjects to act as their own control group. It was expected that the change in the number of aggressive acts from pretest to posttest would be greater following the aggressive film than following the nonaggressive film. This appeared to be the logical outcome if one is willing to assume that the modeling of mentally retarded children is at least approximately equal to that of normal children. For a normal population there is a great deal of research confirming similar hypotheses (Siegel and Kohn, 1959; Mussen and Rutherford, 1961; Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963). Further, the limited amount of research in this area with mentally retarded subjects has indicated this likelihood (Greene and Hoats, 1969; Fechter, 1971).

The group was first analyzed as a whole and then males and females were analyzed separately; t-tests were used to measure statistical significance. The analysis was made on quantitative actions and did not deal with the quality of aggressive acts (i.e., which acts were more aggressive than others). The effects of the films on males vs. females and on those scoring higher I.Q. scores vs. those scoring lower on I.Q. tests were then compared. T-tests were again used to measure statistical significance.

The testing went surprisingly well without unexpected complications or interference. One notable aspect of the study was the large amount of aggression shown during the showing of the aggressive film. Here children often imitated the Thai boxing while it was still on the screen.

Results

The results of the comparison of the effects of nonaggressive vs. aggressive films on the aggressive behavior of the mentally retarded children is summarized in Table 1 and indicates that the viewing of aggression by mentally retarded children incites them to aggressive acts. This is supportive of this author's original hypothesis that mentally retarded children would exhibit more aggressive actions following the viewing of an aggressive film than following the viewing of a nonaggressive film, and is similar to the

results of parallel studies performed on normal children (Siegel, 1956; Mussen and Rutherford, 1961). It is important to remind the reader that these results are concerned with the quantity of aggressive acts and do not deal with the quality of these acts (i.e., is punching more or less aggressive than biting?). A further examination of the data in Table 1 reveals that while males exhibited a greater increase in aggression than females following the nonaggressive film, females exhibited a significantly higher increase than males following the aggressive film.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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This is particularly interesting because similar studies with normal children have not found significant differences between the sexes. It is important to note, however, that females had a lower mean I.Q. score than males and subjects with lower I.Q. scores tended both in this study and in Albert (1957) to score higher on aggression. Thus, this aggression may be indicative of the lower I.Q. scores and not femaleness. The need for further research in this area is indicated.

The increase in aggressive behavior following the nonaggressive film is of particular interest. It may be connected with the third segment of the nonaggressive film. This segment was about a cross-eyed taxicab driver.

While it was not aggressive in content, it did present a great deal of action. This may indicate that the increase in aggression is caused, at least in part, by the action that often accompanies aggression or by some combination of viewed aggression x viewed action.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Table 2 presents a comparison of higher vs. lower intelligence subjects after the viewing of the aggressive film. An interesting finding seen here is that the subjects with lower I.Q. scores tended to be affected more than those with higher I.Q. scores. This was significant to $p < .01$ and is supportive of Albert (1957). Albert found, with normal children, that those who were younger, and those with lower I.Q. scores were more effected by all studied treatments of mass media aggression.

These findings may be interpreted as evidence that the portrayal of aggression in the mass media significantly effect the amount of aggression exhibited by mentally retarded children viewing the media. The results further indicate the need for further experimentation into several related areas in order to get a fuller picture of the effects of mass media portrayed behavior.

Discussion

The experimental results provide evidence supporting the basic hypothesis of this study which stated that mentally retarded children would exhibit more aggressive actions following the viewing of an aggressive film than following the viewing of a nonaggressive film. Since the present research deals with quantitative aggression (i.e., the number of times aggressive acts occur) and not with qualitative aggression (i.e., which of two hits is harder; is a bite more or less aggressive than a kick; how many slaps are as aggressive as a punch, a kick, or a bite, etc.?), further research on qualitative aggression may be necessary before a full picture of the relationship between mass media aggression and media incited aggression is made clear. While the results of this study along with previous research with normal children would indicate the need for less media portrayed violence with more responsible management of that violence which might be appropriate for the media, there remains a void in research concerning the long range effects of media portrayed violence, methods of dealing with media incited aggressive tendencies, relationship studies between the mass media and most other personality phenomena (i.e., effects of mass media sex on sexual tendencies, effects of mass media presentations of cooperative behavior and the viewer's cooperative behavior, etc.), and a general void of research in the area of the effects of the mass media on the mentally retarded.

It is also interesting to note that the findings of this study as with the findings of Siegel (1956) and Mussen and Rutherford (1961) may in reality only be applicable to aggression within a peer group and not to the impersonal relationships of the outside world.

As the study progressed it was observed that aggression in doll play tended to increase. Levin and Sears (1956) also noted this phenomenon and attributed it to the deliberate permissiveness of the experimental procedure progressively acting to reduce any inhibitions to aggression the child may have previously acquired. Moreover, during the study, teachers observed their classes to be more aggressive in class following the permissive free play of each testing situation. This has been similarly noted in experiments with normal children (Feshbach, 1956; Siegel and Kohn, 1959; Mussen and Rutherford, 1961). It has been hypothesized that the child may regard these situations as "permissive giving" with respect to aggression (Siegel and Kohn, 1959; Mussen and Rutherford, 1961). Both during the testing and later in the classroom, subjects tended to capture the general mood of the film rather than modeling specific acts. This is similar to the results reported by Fechter (1971).

It was interesting to find that children with lower I.Q. scores tended to be effected more than those with higher I.Q. scores. This is supported by

the work of Albert (1957) who had similar results with normal children and further noted that younger children tended to score higher on aggression than older children after viewing media portrayed aggression.

This study also found that females were effected more by media portrayed aggression than males. However, it was also noted that this might be linked to the lower I.Q. scores of female subjects and may in fact have nothing to do with femaleness.

It was interesting to find a substantial increase in aggression following the nonaggressive film and it was noted that this might have somehow been related to the large amount of action portrayed in the last segment of the non-aggressive film.

Together these findings show a need for a comparative study of the affects of aggressive films on normal vs. retarded children and a further examination of the correlations of sex x age x I.Q. scores x viewed aggression x viewed action.

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Footnote

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Table 1

Analysis of the Effects of Nonaggressive vs. Aggressive Films on Mentally Retarded Children

Testing	Sex	N	Mean	S.D.	t.
I Nonaggressive Film	M+F	22	2.36	1.43	11.38*
II Aggressive Film	M+F	22	7.82	1.65	
I Nonaggressive Film	M	14	2.86	1.47	7.20*
II Aggressive Film	M	14	6.79	1.45	
I Nonaggressive Film	F	8	1.50	1.36	10.29*
II Aggressive Film	F	8	9.63	1.36	
I Nonaggressive Film	M	14	2.86	1.47	2.13**
	F	8	1.50	1.36	
II Aggressive Film	M	14	6.79	1.46	4.13*
	F	8	9.63	1.36	

*$p < .01$

**$p < .05$

Table 2

Relationship of I.Q. Scores and Aggressive Film Incited Aggression

I.Q. Scores	N	Mean	S.D.	t.
45 and below	10	7.40	3.37	3.14*
46 and above	12	3.16	3.03	

*p$<$.01